COLOSSIANS 1:15-20 — PREEXISTENCE OR PREEMINENCE?

by William M. Wachtel

For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he himself will come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in him, and through him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of his cross; through him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven (Col. 1:13-20).

In standard evangelical commentary, two texts from Paul's writings are constantly used to teach the personal preexistence of Christ: Philippians 2:5-11 and Colossians 1:15-20. These texts are considered to be bulwarks of Trinitarian theology, expressing in some sense Christ's status as Deity. At the time of the Nicene Council, both Arians and Athanasians were fond of using them to prove that Christ existed as a personal being before his birth or "Incarnation." The difference, of course, was that the Arians thought he had a beginning and was the first creature whom God made; while the Athanasians thought he had no beginning and was himself "co-equal, co-eternal, and consubstantial" with the Father. The result of such terms was the claim, still insisted on by Trinitarians today, that Jesus must be seen to be God just as the Father is seen to be God.

This writer questions seriously, however, whether any such ideas were in Paul's mind or in God's inspiration through the Spirit upon Paul's writing of Scripture. In Philippians 2:5, for instance, Paul declares he is holding forth the *historical* example of the man Christ Jesus (as in 1 Tim. 2:5), not some prehistoric example into which can be read ideas of personal preexistence. Can the same be said to be true of Colossians 1:15-20? Let us take a careful look at the text and its implications.

Christ, the Image of God

Verse 15 tells us that God's "beloved Son" (v. 13, NASB) is the "image" of the unseen God. An image, of course, is a visual representation, the copy of an original. The very fact of using a word such as "image" suggests necessarily that there is a difference in identity between the copy and the original. When one looks in the mirror, he sees an "image" of himself. He does not consider himself to be the person who is "behind the glass" but the person who is "in front of the glass." The only reason to labor this point is that many foolish things have been said about the word "image" in this and other verses, seeking to prove that Christ, "the *image* of God" (2 Cor. 4:4), is God himself![1] The word "image" establishes, by its very meaning, that Christ is *not* God. The image is not the same as the original, and in this case the original is *God.*

When Jesus told his disciples, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9), he was not claiming to *be* the Father (a claim that would prove too much, if Trinitarianism were correct), but rather that he is *like* the Father. The writer of Hebrews (1:3) says that he is the "express image" (KJV) — "exact representation" (NIV, NASB) — of God's being, or God's nature. Again, our two words "exact representation" and the single Greek word *carakter*,[2] from which those two words are translated, imply that a copy is being set forth, based on an original. The writer of Hebrews is telling us that God has spoken to us by a Son who is just like God. But to say this Son is "just like" God is to recognize that he is not, in fact, himself God, i.e., the One to whom he is now being "likened." The writer goes on to say that this person who is like God, after purging our sins by his death, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, a further differentiation between the Man who is "just like" God, and the Being who *is* God, himself![3]

Christ, the Firstborn

Verse 15 continues by calling Christ the Firstborn of "every creature" (KJV) or "all creation" (NIV, NASB). If "first" in the word Firstborn means only precedence in time, and if "creation" means the *original* creation of Genesis 1, then the case for Christ's personal preexistence must stand. The Arians and Athanasians would have to be right in their claim that Christ existed as a person before his birth and that this person in fact abandoned his previous mode of existence in order to become a human being. This, precisely, is what any views of personal preexistence *must* find in the texts in Philippians 2 and Colossians 1. What we are questioning here is whether several crucial terms mean, in their context and in Scripture as a whole, what they are popularly interpreted to mean!

Let us begin by examining the word translated "firstborn"- *prototokos.* This word is used a number of times in Scripture, often to designate the child born first in a family. When Esau came to his father Isaac to receive the blessing that was due him, he pleaded the fact that he was Isaac's firstborn — his *prototokos* (Gen. 27:32 LXX). Jacob, the second born son, had already deceived his father and received the blessing intended for Esau. The custom of conferring *special privileges* or a major inheritance on the firstborn son is not only seen in the Bible, but also in the later laws of "primogeniture" in England and other countries, awarding the family inheritance to the eldest son.

There is, however, in Scripture a further meaning to the term *prototokos.* Since the Greek word *protos* can mean either first in time or first in rank, the "firstborn" may be used to designate one who is honored with *first or chief position*, regardless of time of birth. This idea is seen in Exodus 4:22, where God commands Moses to tell Pharaoh, "This is what YHWH says: Israel is my firstborn son. . . . Let my son go, so he may worship me." Clearly, here the word *prototokos* (LXX) has nothing to do with precedence in time, but rather precedence in rank among the nations, as God views their relative importance.[4] The same is true in Jeremiah 31:9 (38:9 LXX), where God calls Ephraim his *prototokos* (even though Ephraim's brother, Manasseh, was the elder of the two). Again, it is precedence in rank, or importance, that is in view. The classic example of this usage is found in Psalm 89:27 (88:27 LXX), where God describes in glowing words the promised Davidic king, the Messiah: "I will also appoint him **my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth**." This foremost position as King of kings is a matter of *appointment,* not time of birth![5] These facts and this usage as to the word "firstborn" may well have much significance in helping us to understand how and why Christ can be called "the Firstborn of all creation" in Colossians 1:15. "If *prototokos* is selected in Col. 1:15 and then again in 1:18 to express this supremacy, this is because of the great importance which the term 'firstborn' took on as a word for *rank* in the OT and then retained in later Judaism."[6]

Over All Creation

The NIV calls Christ "the firstborn over all creation," while NASB has "firstborn *of* all creation," reflecting a literal translation of the genitive case. KJV also translates the genitive literally: "the firstborn *of* every creature." The NASB and KJV renderings could be interpreted to imply that Christ was the first *created* being, just as the Arians believed. They understood "first" to refer to precedence in time. That is why Arius declared that "there was a time when he was not," i.e., before his being created. It was this that the Athanasians rejected so vehemently, insisting that he was eternal, "begotten in eternity, before all time."[7] To them this meant he was "co-eternal" with the Father and therefore himself God.

It is necessary at this point to consider whether Paul uses the word "creation" here in reference to the original creation of Genesis 1, or whether he may have in mind what may be called the "new creation." Paul goes on to define this creation as comprising all things "in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him." Certainly, it was Christ himself who described the original creation as being *God's* work (Mark 13:19; cp. Heb. 4:4, where God not Jesus rested from the work of creation) — suggesting that Christ did not see himself as creator of the "all things" mentioned in Genesis 1:31.[8] Paul, in fact, seems to give an exact description of what he means by the "all things" created — namely, "thrones, powers, rulers, authorities." If this is what he means, then we must ask in what sense Christ can be called the creator of such.

Just before his ascension, Christ said that "all authority in heaven and on earth" had now been given to him (Matt. 28:18). With that authority he commissioned his apostles to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations and to teach them all his commands. Moses had foretold that Messiah would be a prophet like Moses himself, whose word would have the force of law, demanding obedience (Deut. 18:15, 18, 19; Acts 3:22, 23). But what about his authority "in heaven"? Paul says that when Christ was raised from the dead and was set at

God's right hand in the "heavenlies," his new position brought him to a status "far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come" (Eph. 1:21). Not only that, but "God placed all things under his feet" (v. 22). Colossians 1:17 echoes this, in saying that "in him all things hold together." Col. 2:10 describes him as "the head over every power and authority." God rewarded Jesus' "obedience unto death" by highly exalting him and giving him the name which is above every name. At the name of Jesus every knee is required to bow, "in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:8-11).

These ascriptions of supreme authority to Christ, under God, suggest that when Christ came to be seated at the right hand of God, he — in turn — set up, or created, a new system of rulerships among the angelic beings as well as preparing a place of honor and service within his Father's household for all his faithful people, both in this age and in the age to come (John 14:2,3). All of this is then part of "the new creation." It is this ***new*** creation that the present writer understands to be the subject of Colossians 1:15-17. If this view is correct, the personal preexistence of Christ is not at all the subject of our text, contrary to popular interpretation!

Before All Things

Verse 17 declares that Christ is "before all things" — *pro panton.* This phrase has been seized upon as proof of his personal preexistence. But care must be taken to notice that the verb here is in the present tense — "is" — not "was"! Paul does not tell us that Christ "was" before all things, evidence for preexistence. But what does "before" mean? The Greek word used here — *pro* — has three common uses: before, in the sense of *place* = "in front of"; before, in the sense of *time* = "prior to"; and before, in the sense of *preeminence, rank, advantage.*[9] The latter usage is seen in 1 Peter 4:8 — *pro panton,* "before all things" or "above all things" = "most important of all." Here, *pro* has nothing to do with time or place, but rather stresses how Christian love is *preeminent* above all other virtues. James 5:12 provides another example of the same usage and of the phrase *pro panton*.

To say, therefore, that Christ is *pro panton* is to say that he is, under God, the Preeminent One, the Most Important One! This is underscored by the last statement of the next verse, describing him as having, in everything, "the preeminence" (KJV), "the supremacy" (NIV), "the first place" (NASB). To emphasize this preeminence even more, Paul adds the personal pronoun *autos* to the verb *proteuo,* meaning that HE, *Christ himself,* is being given first place in all God's universe! This reminds the writer of Pharaoh's exalting Joseph to first place in Egypt. He told him, "You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you. . . . I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt. . . . I am Pharaoh, but without your word no one will lift hand or foot in all Egypt" (Gen. 41:40, 41, 44). This is the kind of preeminence and rulership that God has granted to his Son — to be over all other beings — typified only dimly by the history of Joseph's own exaltation!

Paul piles on superlatives to declare that in Christ "all things hold together." The Greek verb translated "hold together" — *sunistemi* — is given various definitions by the lexicographers. One suggestive definition is "cohere." All things cohere in Christ and provide a coherent meaning to the universe. He is the reason for it all, because he is God's only-begotten Son, the perfect image of the Father himself! Another definition is "to have one's proper place." All things in the universe have their own proper place, designed by the Creator, YHWH, to be in perfect relationship and harmony with "the Son whom God loves" (v. 13).

Christ's headship over the church is a frequent theme in Paul's writings. Verse 18 declares that headship, and goes on to call him *arche*, "beginning" (KJV, NIV, NASB). This word also means "ruler, authority."[10] It gives further emphasis to Paul's theme of Christ's preeminence and supreme authority under God. In that now conferred authority, all things begin and end in Christ. As the beginning of the New Creation, he is the "firstborn from among the dead," the first human being to rise immortal from the grave and to become thereby a "partaker of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). As *prototokos* he is also "chiefborn" from among the dead, because he in turn is the Lifegiver, the Prince of Life whose voice will awaken and call forth the sleeping dead from their graves (John 5:21-29; Acts 3:15). And it is by resurrection from the dead that he achieves his supreme position (v. 18: "in order that"). This means that he did not already have that position.

The Fullness of God

"God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him" (v. 19). The past tense here, combined with the immediate mention of Christ's reconciling work in his death on the cross (v.20), seems to indicate that Paul has in mind the period of Christ's mortal lifetime. It was then that Christ was already filled with God's fullness, just

as believers are called upon to seek that fullness for their own lives today (Eph. 3:19).[11] In Christ's case, however, there was no limit to the Spirit working in him — he was totally filled with God's Spirit and power throughout his earthly ministry.[12] His initial preeminence is seen in his walking the earth as though he were God himself.[13]

     Later, in Colossians 2:9, Paul speaks of God's "fullness" again, but describes it in a special way and in the *present* tense. "In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form." Since his resurrection to bodily immortality and his being granted "all authority in heaven and earth" Christ is exalted by his Father to the highest place in the universe, next to God himself, and is given the highest name (Phil. 2:9). He can be described, therefore, as possessing the fullness of the Deity. How could his preeminence be emphasized more powerfully than this? But all of this is short-circuited and spoiled by Trinitarian notions and the teaching of Christ's personal preexistence! If those ideas were true, he already possessed — in person — total preeminence long before he was born, before he had been obedient unto death. But, as Paul insists, it was this very obedience — and the humility from which it sprang — that was the *reason* for, and the *cause* of, that exaltation and that preeminence!

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[1] See, for example, *The Living Bible* on 2 Cor. 4:4.

[2] This word may be transliterated as "character," but the modern English word has come a rather long way from its original Greek meaning.

[3] "Majesty" is probably used here as an equivalent for the divine name, YHWH.

[4] "When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set up boundaries for the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel. For the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted inheritance" (Deut. 32:8,9 NIV).

[5] See the excellent discussion of *prototokos* in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* VI, 871-881.

[6] *Ibid*., VI, 879.

[7] Stated in the Nicene Creed as "begotten of the Father before all the ages" — my translation from the Greek text found in Schaff's *Creeds of Christendom,* II, 57. Also see article "Eternal generation," p. 194, in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology.*

[8] "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good."

[9] Arndt and Gingrich's *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature,* article *pro.*

[10] *Ibid*., article *arche.*

[11] "To know this love that surpasses knowledge — that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."

[12] "For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God; to him God gives the Spirit without limit" (John 3:34).

[13] Philippians 2:6, speaking of the historical person Christ Jesus, tells us that—as a *man*— he was in the *morphe* of God. This word, usually translated "form," in this context has the other Koiné Greek meaning of "status, position, rank." This is proved by the use of the same word in verse 7, where Christ is shown to have taken the "status" or "position" of a servant. Cf. *morphe* in Moulton and Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament;* and Kenneth S. Wuest, *The Practical Use of the Greek New Testament,* p. 84.

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